

Wilfred M. McClay

## Recovering the Western Soul

There can be no question of the signal importance and influence of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Any future historian who proposes to explain the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s will have to contend with the looming presence of Allan Bloom’s grand and gloomy tome—along with the words and works of the other “killer Bs” of the era, William J. Bennett and Saul Bellows—as one of the chief rallying points for the conservative side of that conflict, and particularly the conservative critique of higher education. It should be admitted at once that many of Bloom’s criticisms were not entirely new. By 1987, the declining state of America’s colleges and universities as bastions of cultural conservation and liberal learning had been an object of public concern for a long time. Critics throughout the twentieth century had regularly scored the American university for its ever-growing weakness for vocationalism, utilitarianism, gigantism, and credentialism, and for its adoption of a chaotic elective system that all but conceded that the university itself no longer knew, or could say, what an educated person was supposed to know. But Bloom gave a fresh tone and new impetus to such criticisms.

It should also be admitted that Bloom’s book was idiosyncratic in the extreme, a most improbable candidate—as improb-

able as the man himself—for the major cultural role in which it was cast. Coming back to the book twenty years after its heyday, one finds this fact especially striking. It is an exceedingly odd book, a book that is at one moment possessed of qualities of monumental eloquence and high intelligence, but the next moment disappointingly clumsy or maddeningly petty. With its self-dramatizing gestures, its rambling and unsystematic organization, its weakness for highly abstract argument (and consequent aversion to concrete or empirical detail), its fondness for epigrammatic phrasing (although the epigrams are often buried in mid-paragraph), and its penchant for opinionated pronouncements and sweeping social generalizations, *Closing* is surely an acquired taste. It may well be one of those books that will always be more admired than read by the larger public. Rarely has a book been more resistant to skimming, or more difficult to paraphrase. Never, I think, has there been a more unlikely manifesto.

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But when it comes to the success of social or cultural criticism, timing is everything. The moment has to be right. And the fabulous success of *Closing* testifies to the prescience of the book's editor at Simon and Schuster, Robert Asahina, who saw the potential market for a learned jeremiad on education—even a highly theoretical one written by an academic political philosopher, a student of Leo Strauss firmly ensconced in the ivoriest of towers at the University of Chicago. In retrospect, it makes a certain sense. There is a special weight given in American culture to critics who criticize from within, and Bloom sounded to most readers like precisely the academic mandarin he was. His diction signaled that here was no populist rant by an anti-intellectual yahoo, but a passionate defense of the very highest ideal of the university, presented to the world by one of its most distinguished members. For all that Americans are said to be paragons of anti-intellectualism and to distrust the academy, that has always been a half-truth at best. Americans may distrust the academy, but they also highly esteem it; they do not want to see it torn down gratuitously. Coming from a man of Bloom's stature, a charge of *trahison des clercs* would have great credibility: he knew intimately whereof he spoke, and his criticisms were born of love.

What made the timing right? The book's arrival corresponded, as did the culture wars themselves, with a noticeable deepening of American academia's intellectual and moral crises. In the 1960s, conflicts over politics and curricula had been endemic and often nasty, but there was still a sense that there was more than one viable side to the arguments, and still a great deal of sensible disciplinary ballast left in most academic fields. By the late 1970s, this state of affairs had changed dramatically; and by the 1980s, with the ascent of the baby-boom generation into the most influential posi-

tions of academic leadership, accompanied by the triumph of a curious alliance of obligatory leftism, cultural relativism, careerism, hedonism, and consumerism as the reigning deities of the academy, the installation of the 1960s radical agenda was rendered complete—or at any rate, as complete as it was ever likely to be.

Did this great academic revolution usher in a state of perpetual excitement or revolutionary élan, an electric condition in which the intellectual life of the university was made vibrant by robust, sincere passion and high public purpose? Hardly. Instead, the post-1960s academy quickly became a case study in what Max Weber called the routinization of charisma. Its overriding mood became anxious and stiff, ever fearful of eating a peach or committing a racial or sexual *faux pas* or other ideological peccadillo. A surreal and deadening splitmindedness began to settle like a dense fog over American campuses as the perspectives of the past fell silent, the radical became the conventional, formerly subversive ideas were transformed into a whole new generation of empty platitudes and tacit compulsions (“political correctness”), and the once-fearsome word “transgressive” was translated into a term of hearty commendation, the intellectual equivalent of a (now forbidden) pat on the back.

Nor was that the end of the matter. The term “tenured radical” is, after all, a paradoxical one, and the tension between the two words is not really sustainable for very long. By the mid-1980s, “tenured” was winning out, as the historian Russell Jacoby observed in his own 1987 book *The Last Intellectuals*, a penetrating account of how his once-radical and now careerist peers had sacrificed their bohemian ideals for bourgeois comforts and sold out their message for a mess of pottage, succumbing to the temptations of academic professionalization, institutional control, and obscu-

rantism.<sup>1</sup> The fact that they honestly believed they were doing something else, still remaining true to their radical roots, made their plight all the more pathetic and self-delusive in Jacoby's eyes. In fact, they had created a state of affairs that was just as damaging to radicalism as it was to academic values.

Bloom's book offered an engaging account of what might be called the deep intellectual and social history of all this, and of how these changes in the professoriate played out in the attitudes of students and the atmosphere of the classroom. The central motif of the book is the interplay between two different ways of understanding openness and closedness, and Bloom exploited this dualism brilliantly. We all are likely to agree that "openness," in the sense of a willingness to be self-critical and question one's own premises and prejudices, is a good thing. It is, in fact, one of the chief intellectual virtues of the West. But the problem, in Bloom's view, is this: the current understanding of "openness," which entails the dogmatic teaching that all values are relative to the culture from which they spring and in which they inhere, has not produced in our students an alert, wide-ranging, and critical engagement of diverse subjects and perspectives.

Instead, this understanding of openness generates in students a pervasive listlessness and yawning indifference, precisely because "relativism...extinguishes the real motive of education, the search for a good life" and "the truth about life."<sup>2</sup> Thus, as Bloom expressed it in one of his most famous phrases, "what is advertised as a great opening is a great closing" (34), an attitude which regards the world as fundamentally unknowable, a congeries of incommensurables, of monads without windows, and which therefore regards ideas as mere byproducts of provincial, self-contained

*cultures* rather than proud achievements of a truth-seeking universal *civilization*. What was once an openness that led to "the quest for knowledge and certitude" has become "the openness of indifference" (41), which simultaneously humbles our intellectual pride (by telling us we are incapable of finding the truth) and affirms that we are okay just as we are (because, after all, there is no truth to be found anyway, only more or less pleasant experiences).

What was once "the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason" (Openness 1) is now the path that requires "accepting everything and denying reason's power" (Openness 2). The latter "openness" can only be called profoundly regressive, however, for "a culture is a cave" (38), and the activity of philosophy rightly challenges us to resist the confinements of the cave rather than to submit to them. The allusion to Plato's *Republic* is of central importance, for the openness taught by Socrates and promoted by Plato is, or should be, the paradigmatic enemy of all mere acquiescence in "culture." By the same token, the openness taught by the partisans of "culture" is the enemy of philosophy, because philosophy must be an activity grounded in the search for the good and the true. The opposition between the philosopher and the city, so stressed by Bloom's teacher Strauss, remains axiomatic. But this stance is of an entirely different character from the phony and superficial opposition between the "adversary culture" and the "establishment"—for the adversary culture of the present-day academy is *also* a culture, and therefore a cave. "Openness to closedness," Bloom concludes, "is what we teach" in the present-day academy (39). Hence, the depth of his concern, expressed in his lengthy subtitle, for the "souls" of his students.

There is much, much more, of course, including slashing, half-mad, zany-bril-

liant accounts of American popular music, of the sexual mores of the young, of the German intellectual influence upon American life, and of the development of “nihilism, American style,” in which the Nietzschean existential abyss is transformed, by the likes of Woody Allen, into something almost cuddly. The book is often quite funny, and much of the humor holds up well because so little about the mentality of academe has changed since 1987. Bloom is constantly taking chances, dancing on the edge of the volcano, and occasionally he stumbles or makes a fool of himself and gets badly singed in the process. His account of David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, for example, could not possibly have been written by anyone who ever actually read the book (144–146). More generally, he can be appallingly slapdash and careless in his offhand accounts of ideas and thinkers he disdains, treating them as mere roadkill along the path to his chosen objective, inferior objects unworthy of the dignity of being accurately described, much less quoted and wrestled with.

Yet a sense of gravity is something different from solemnity, or even scholarly precision, and what makes *Closing* such exhilarating and worthwhile reading even now is its profound seriousness. Bloom does not see the decline of American higher education as yet another problem to be “solved” by smarter policies or better pedagogical techniques. Instead, the crisis of liberal education “is a reflection of a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilization” (346).



Bloom makes a point.

The stakes, in short, could not be higher.

For that reason, however, one is obliged to assess the ultimate value of Bloom’s book by that same very high standard. No one can deny that he bequeathed us a splendid critique, in many respects, of the failings of higher education as it existed in the late 1980s and to a large extent as it exists today. But does he really have anything solid to offer in place of the follies he describes? On this matter, one has to render a more mixed judgment.

Bloom provides an incomparable account of the ennobling effects of the study of the great texts of the Western tradition. Young men and women “live more truly and fully in reading Plato and Shakespeare than at any other time, because then they are participating in essential being and forgetting their accidental lives” (380). The fact “that this kind of humanity exists or existed,

and that we can somehow still touch it with the tips of our outstretched fingers, makes our imperfect humanity, which we can no longer bear, tolerable.” But precisely what one carries away from this activity, beyond a disposition to seek the truth, is far less clear.

Indeed, there are times when it seems Bloom has trouble imagining that there is a genuine world beyond the seminar room, a world in which even the most ordinary men and women must every day choose whether they will work and struggle and sacrifice and die for causes and principles and loves that are unambiguous to them. “The real community of man,” he asserts, as opposed to all the “self-contradictory simulacra of community” on offer, “is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers” (381). This group

includes all of us in principle, perhaps, but in fact it “includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good.” It is here, he says, “that the contact people so desperately seek is to be found.” All other kinds of relatedness “are only imperfect reflections of this one.” What holds us together is not shared beliefs or a shared way of life, but shared questions. Liberal education “does not consist so much in answers as in the permanent dialogue” (380).

This may be an inspiring vision. But it is also fundamentally a pedagogue’s rather narrow vision, one that absurdly places the university at the center of the universe, reduces the civilization of the West to a collection of books and interrogatives and dialogues, and fails to credit a vast array of institutions and activities—labor, married love, family life, childrearing, citizenship, and religious commitments—that form the steady and substantive basis upon which the work of questions and dialogues must rest. Bloom’s is a version of the history of the West that is, so to speak, all Athens and no Jerusalem, in which the questioning and self-critical part of the Western heritage is taken for the whole, along with a certain rough-and-ready notion of natural rights.

This is an understanding of education that is both overly rationalistic and overly romantic. Rationalistic in its Socratic insistence that all conventions be held up to strict rational examination. But also surprisingly romantic. Although it would horrify Bloom to be told so, it has much in common with the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson—like Bloom, a very American thinker—who sought to conflate the questioning intellectual life with all else, and who shared Bloom’s high regard for nature and his consequent disdain for inherited forms and self-conscious traditions. When Bloom says that “there is no real education that

does not respond to felt need; anything else acquired is trifling display” (19), he could have stolen the sentence from Emerson’s famous essay, “The American Scholar.” Can he really mean that the only genuine student of Latin forms or Greek paradigms is the one who “feels the need” of them? Isn’t the formation of the young today suffering precisely from the requirement to be *too* responsive to their “felt needs,” or more generally to the immediate and proximate, and from too little authority exercised by elders: teachers, parents, pastors, and the like? Not according to Bloom. “Education,” he declares, “is not sermonizing to children against their instincts and pleasures, but providing a natural continuity between what they feel and what they can and should be” (80). Emerson—or John Dewey—could hardly have said it better.

That is not all. Bloom’s account of true Socratic education has uncomfortably much in common with the languid pragmatism of Richard Rorty, which sees the ongoing conversation of philosophy as an end in itself—and the “truths” of religion as pernicious primarily because they are “conversation stoppers.” What does Bloom do with a student who not only seeks the truth but believes that he has found it? Does that student cease to be a lover of wisdom? Must he, instead, mirror the aestheticism of Matthew Arnold and find a substitute for ultimate faith in the admittedly refined and exalted activity of serious conversation about what *others* may have believed about ultimate things?

Let me repeat that there is much to be said for Bloom’s vision of education. The use of the great books as the foundational core of liberal learning is the very best means we have for introducing young people to the great questions of human existence and they remain touchstones for all our subsequent inquiry, just as Bloom says they do. The liberation he seeks for young people is

a highly desirable stage in all education worthy of the name, even if it liberates only to allow for the eventual possibility of a self-conscious embrace of what had been held unreflectively before.

But such a vision does not answer the larger crisis that Bloom himself posited, the crisis of our Western civilization, because he had only a partial and misleading understanding of what the West is. That fact was visible already in 1987, but it has become even more apparent since the emergence into public awareness on 9/11 of the great civilizational struggle that now preoccupies us—and is likely to continue to preoccupy us for the rest of our lives. Here I speak not merely of the “war on terrorism” but of the catastrophic loss of civilizational self-confidence exhibited by the West, particularly in Europe. The demographic collapse experienced by all Western European countries, and the concurrent changes in the makeup of those societies as they follow a rapid and seemingly inexorable course toward Islamization, speaks louder than any words, and has raised the question of whether a strictly liberal and secular Europe has the will to perpetuate itself, let alone defend itself. This question in turn leads back to the point that Bloom himself makes, about a failure “at the peaks of learning.” For even an educational vision as deep and humane as Bloom’s does not, finally, tell us why we should have children, what we owe our fathers and mothers and neighbors, why we should make good on our commitments, why we should struggle to preserve our way of life, what is finally worth fighting for, and possibly dying for.

Bloom assumed, over against the multiculturalism coming into fashion in his day, that the civilization of the West is universal in character, based as it is on ideas—such as natural rights—that are grounded in unchanging nature rather than changeable convention. But this

triumphalism seems far less plausible today. Indeed, it was already being challenged forcefully well before 9/11, notably by writers such as Samuel Huntington, who emphasized the particularity of our civilization, and the need for the West to see itself as a competitor in a world of civilizational alternatives rather than as the wellspring of that self-evident, universal “progress” to which “the rest” all aspire.<sup>3</sup> Like the historian David Gress,<sup>4</sup> Huntington has made a strong case that we have defined the West without sufficient reference to its religious and historical roots—precisely the features of the West that Bloom neglects.

In either case, it will no longer do to see the West as defined exclusive by its secularity, its tolerance, its moral relativism, and its epistemological uncertainty. Or even by its philosophical openness, real or imaginary. If those things were enough, then the West would have the courage to defend itself more energetically than it has so far. In that sense, 9/11 (and all that it has come to symbolize) has changed things in ways that Allan Bloom and *The Closing of the American Mind* only dimly anticipated. In that sense, a reading of the book today not only sheds light on the ongoing pathologies of the academy, but it marks the distance we have come, and the different character of the challenges we now face.

We can no longer put off the question of whether our way of life requires a metaphysical grounding; and the answer to that question is becoming increasingly clear. It is perhaps indicative of the nature of our new challenge that the figure of Pope Benedict XVI looms so large in it—less as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church per se than as the world’s most visible, articulate, and astute spokesman for the view that reason and faith are mutually dependent, so that reason without faith is as pernicious and false as is faith without

reason. His important address at the University of Regensburg, titled “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections” (September 12, 2006), was not, as careful observers have pointed out, primarily directed at Islam. It was addressed to those in the West who would “de-Hellenize” Christianity by claiming that faith and reason have nothing to do with one another—a position that he believes leads to, among other things, violence in the name of religion. But it need hardly be said that his argument also goes the other way, that the effort to “de-Christianize” reason is equally misguided and will lead to a weightless, aimless, horizonless world in which man will have lost any sense of the properly human ends to which all the ingenious improvements wrought by instrumental rationality should be directed; a world in which all moral limits on human choice and behavior will come to seem increasingly flimsy and arbitrary; a world in which the value of the human person will dwindle to nothing.

No less a secular paragon than the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has come a surprisingly long way toward a similar perspective, a development that was made plain in a series of dialogues he engaged in with Joseph Ratzinger (before he became Pope Benedict XVI). “For the normative self-understanding of modernity,” Habermas said in a recent interview, “Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.”<sup>5</sup> This of course does not amount to a credo or conversion on Habermas’s part. He is careful to hew to the Rawlsian position that in a

modern liberal democracy religiously based arguments must always be susceptible of translation into secular vocabularies. But even that dictum can be understood as roughly compatible with Benedict’s own view about the relationship between faith and reason.

And there is reason to wonder whether that dictum itself can ultimately survive without modification. According to the historian Richard Wolin, what produced the shift in Habermas’s perspective and led to his dialogues with Ratzinger was the issue of bioethics. In 2002 Habermas had published *In Defense of Humanity*, which addressed itself to the perils of biological engineering and human cloning by affirming the right of each human being to a unique human identity.<sup>6</sup> It is not a particularly convincing argument, and it is not hard to see that the sustaining of such a right will be very difficult, in the end, if it is to be attempted on purely secular grounds. But the very fact that Habermas felt compelled to make such an argument bespeaks an admirably troubled moral sensibility in him, a moral awareness that a Christian might say is “written on the heart.” It suggests that any principle short of the *imago Dei*, the idea that our very existence is a gift, will be unlikely to give adequate shape to that sensibility.

All of which is to argue that what we mean by “the West” will henceforth have to take such themes into account, and lay bare the need for the right kinds of presuppositions, in order for the inquiry that Bloom so greatly, and rightly, treasured to go forward. Everything that Bloom believed about reason, about natural rights, about friendship, and about the search for truth and the love of wisdom—all his solicitude for the souls of his students—depends on something else, something more, that it perhaps never occurred to him, or us, to acknowledge. But those were different times.

1. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
2. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 34. Further references to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.
3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
4. David Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).
5. Richard Wolin, "Jürgen Habermas and Post-Secular Societies," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 23, 2005), B16.
6. Ibid.

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